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A group of junior high school teachers devised a literature program to meet the needs of the individual learner. They selected themes of interest to students in grades 6-8 and then prepared a list of books of varying degrees of reading difficulty which related to these themes. The student could, therefore, read a book commensurate with his ability and at his own rate of speed. One successful technique for individualizing instruction and encouraging intellectual inquiry was the preparation of a set of questions about a book to which the student could respond on his own. He was encouraged to experience the work itself, relating it to his own experiences and to other literary works. Questions and discussion on E. B. White's "Charlotte's Web," for example, first concentrated on the student's personal reactions; then emphasized plot, character, and theme; and finally tried to guide the student to relate his discoveries about animals in this book to other animal stories he had read. Such a literature program places the burden of learning upon the student and should develop to the fullest possible degree his reading power. (LH)

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Individualizing Instruction in Junior High School

Sister Philomene Schiller

A major challenge facing educators today is the problem of how to adapt instructional procedures to the needs of the individual learner. Since research has substantiated the fact that great differences are found in the learning ability of students, a program in literature must be devised to challenge those who progress rapidly and to meet the needs of students who have average ability in reading and those who have difficulty in reading.

A group of teachers in the middle school (levels 6-8) prepared a program in literature on themes which would be of interest to students of these levels. After the themes were selected, the teachers listed a number of books which were related to the different themes--books which had varying degrees of reading difficulty, some with mature concepts and an advanced vocabulary and others with readily-grasped concepts and an easy vocabulary. The student, therefore, read books which were commensurate with his ability. In addition to an adjustment in the content to be read, the student could progress at his own rate of speed. Each student could take as much time as he needed to complete the books.

The main objective of the study of literature is the joy of experiencing the work itself. After reading the novel or poem, the student will want to talk about the selection as he sees it and as it is related to his own encounter with life. The literary selection will extend his feelings on some aspect of living and will prompt him to want to talk about it. John Dixon, in reporting on the Dartmouth Seminar suggests: "We may talk over relationships of

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the story with reality, but we cannot do the work for our pupils!--to feel those relationships as one is carried through the experience and be deeply involved in it is a different matter from recognizing them at a cool distance away."[1]

A second objective is to relate one literary work to all the literature he already knows in order to understand literature as a whole. Northrop Frye comments:

> There is the conscious, critical response we made after we've finished reading . . ., where we compare what we've experienced with other things of the same kind and form a judgment of value and proportion on it.[2]

Students in the middle school can make these relationships of one work to other literary selections. Relating one work to another is not difficult when the books center around a theme. The major themes selected for students in the middle school were the following:

I. Man and Nature
   - A. Observing and Explaining Nature
   - B. Encountering and Exploring Nature
   - C. Using or Making Adjustments to Nature

II. Man and Man
   - A. Family-Friendship Unit
   - B. The Peer Group and The School
   - C. The American Heritage

III. Man and Himself
   - A. The Adventurous Man
   - B. The Thinking Man
   - C. The Warring Man
   - D. The Understanding Man

The goal of individualizing instruction is to place the burden of learning upon the student and thus to stimulate independence, initiative, and self-discipline. One way of encouraging intellectual inquiry is to have an individual packet of materials on the story to which the student may respond. In this packet are questions on a particular story which will make the book more understandable to the reader. The student in junior high can achieve an in-depth study of literature in accordance with his intellectual ability.

One example of an in-depth exploration is the set of questions which a student at the sixth level might ponder upon completing the reading of Charlotte's Web, a story in the animal unit.

Characterization.

Fiction provides un an opportunity to observe human nature in all its varied forms. It helps us to know people and to understand their problems and appreciate their joys. In a story we see a character in many situations which emphasize the particular traits of this person. A writer stresses the dominant trait of a character in his actions with other people.

What is the dominant character trait of Templeton the rat? Give specific examples from the story that show this trait. Is this characterization consistent throughout the story?

Contrast the character traits of Fern Arable and Avery Arable.

How does E.B. White portray Charlotte as intelligent?

What is the outstanding characteristic trait of the sheep? Give examples from the story to defend your position.

Plot.

1. Why did Wilbur the pig go to live in Mr. Zuckerman's barnyard?
2. What were the complications in Wilbur's life at the barnyard? De-

fend your points from details in the story.

3. How did Charlotte the spider and Wilbur become good friends?

Theme

When you consider some of the main acts of the characters in this story, what would you say is the theme of the story? (The theme is the author's point in writing the story.)

The Conflict

Between what two groups does a conflict take place in this story?

What group seems to be victorious?

What seems to be the new attitude of the unvictorious group to the triumphant side?

Imagery

What do you think the author is trying to show by the rotating day, the rotating seasons (spring, summer, fall, winter), Charlotte's full life span?

The Language

1. Did you notice any recurring pattern of sentences in Charlotte's Web?

2. Read aloud the paragraphs that describe the seasons: summer, autumn turning into winter, winter, spring. How does E.B. White give you a feeling for the season of the year?

A group of eight students discussed the story of Charlotte's Web with the teacher. The first part of the discussion focused on the student's personal reactions to the story as it related to his own life. The students then reacted to some of the questions in the individual packet on characterization, plot, theme, conflict, imagery, and the language used by E.B. White. This discussion was an intellectual inquiry where students interacted with one

another and with their teacher. John Dixon in his report on the Dartmouth Seminar advocates that the teacher of English "has to learn for himself and develop with his pupils the full potential of discussion methods, with their emphasis on interplay of ideas, dialectal exchange, shared experience, group learning and understanding."[3]

After a discussion of Charlotte's Web, the students related their discoveries about animals in this book to those of other animal stories they had read. They wrote a summary of several paragraphs synthesizing their knowledge obtained from reading many books on the emotions, needs, and sufferings of animals.

In these literature units the student had the opportunity to progress in accordance with his specific maturity in reading and to proceed at his own individual rate, not at a pace set by other students or by his teacher. Such a program should enable the student to develop to the fullest degree possible his reading power as well as to grow in initiative and independence in making his reading choices.

FOOTNOTES

[1] John Dixon, Growth through English, A Report Based on the Dartmouth Seminar, 1966 (London: Cox and Wyman Ltd., 1967), p. 57.

[2] Northrop Frye, The Educated Imagination (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1964) p. 104.

[3] John Dixon, op. cit., p. 111.